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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that evaluated both the implementation and the public's reception of the first 2 years (1990-92) of Connecting Learning Assures Successful Students (CLASS), a cooperative learning program in 62 Indiana schools, are presented in this policy bulletin. Data were collected from three participating elementary schools through the following methods: classroom observations; teacher interviews; telephone interviews with over four-fifths of the 44 principals and superintendents; a survey of all participating teachers (n=289), which produced a 53 percent response rate; and a survey of 809 parents resulting in a 41 percent response rate. CLASS, a program that combines cooperative learning, social skills development, and thematic instruction, is also an effective teacher-development program. Findings indicate that CLASS also appears to increase students' enthusiasm for schools, foster the development of social skills, and improve higher-order thinking skills. On the negative side, the program is very time consuming for teachers to implement, and some parents are concerned that it slights basic-skills instruction. Parents in some communities have also opposed CLASS on religious grounds, charging that it promotes the New Age movement. Overall, however, CLASS appears to be a promising model for educational reform, providing teachers with long-term training needed to learn new instructional strategies and adapt those strategies to their own schools and classrooms. Seven suggestions are offered for implementing the CLASS model at other schools. (LMI)

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Connecting Learning Assures Successful Students

A Study of the CLASS Program

by Mark Buechler

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CLASS, a program that combines cooperative learning, social skills development, and thematic instruction, is currently in place in 62 schools across Indiana. In a recent study, the Bloomington office of the Indiana Education Policy Center found that CLASS was an effective professional development program for teachers. CLASS also appears to increase students' enthusiasm for school, foster the development of social skills such as cooperation, and improve higher-order thinking skills. On the negative side, the program is very time-consuming for teachers to implement, and some parents are concerned that it slights basic skills instruction. CLASS has also sparked controversy in some communities where parents have accused it of promoting New Age religion.

Overall, however, CLASS appears to be a promising model for education reform, providing teachers with the kind of long-term training they need to learn new instructional strategies and adapt those strategies to their own schools and classrooms.

On the wall outside Rosalie Alexander's second-grade classroom at Central Elementary hung photographs of "dirt desserts," or pies that students had made out of edible materials to represent the layers of the soil. Inside the classroom, earthworms crept through real soil in an earthworm farm, and fish swam in a pond built in one corner of the room. Soft music played. The children, whose desks were arranged in groups of four, were working on various projects focused on ducks—writing, drawing, or designing mind maps (visual arrangements of key ideas).

Alexander's approach to teaching was largely the result of her participation in CLASS (Connecting Learning Assures Successful Students). CLASS synthesizes cooperative learning, social skills development, hands-on activities, and thematic instruction in an attempt to transform the traditional school into a community of lifelong learners.

CLASS is an important program, in part because it uses teaching strategies that have gained (or regained) currency during the restructuring movement. Also, CLASS provides a significant test of one of the basic premises of restructuring—that, given proper support and training, teaching staffs can successfully tailor innovations to their own educational visions.

For these reasons, the Bloomington office of the Indiana Education Policy Center, at the request of the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE), conducted a study of the first two years of CLASS (1990-92). We were interested primarily in how CLASS has been implemented in schools and classrooms and how it has been received by administrators, teachers, students, and parents. To find out about the program, we visited three participating schools (Central Elementary in Lebanon, Amy Beverland Elementary in Lawrence Township, and Northwood Elementary in Franklin), where we observed classrooms and interviewed teachers, administrators, and parents. We also conducted telephone interviews with over four fifths of the 44 principals and superintendents involved in CLASS, and we sent written surveys to all 289 participating teachers and to parents at two schools. This bulletin is a summary of the 120-page report that emerged from the study.

Background

CLASS was developed by Barbara Pedersen, a former teacher at Central and the winner in 1989 of the Christa McAuliffe Award for distinguished teaching, leadership, and innovation. The IDOE began supporting CLASS programs at Central and four other schools in 1990. That number rose to 26 schools in 14 districts in 1991-92. The total cost of the program was \$155,000 in 1990-91 and \$160,000 in 1991-92. (In 1992-93, 62 schools in 25 districts participated, at a cost of \$360,000.)

In some schools, such as Central, the entire staff is involved with CLASS, while in others, only a few teachers participate. Teachers are trained by CLASS staff, and schools receive funds from the IDOE to cover release time and classroom materials. In 1991-92, for example, each school received \$3,000.

The CLASS Process

CLASS is based on the Integrated Thematic Instruction program of education consultant Susan Kovalik, which in turn incorporates the brain-compatibility research of Leslie Hart, the multiple-intelligences theory of Howard Gardner, and several other approaches. To understand CLASS, one needs a basic familiarity with the components of Integrated Thematic Instruction. See the box on this page for a description of the main components.

In training sessions, Pedersen exposes teachers to these and other components, but she does not *impose* them on teachers. Teachers are encouraged to explore and implement the compo-

Main Components of CLASS

The main components of CLASS, based on the Integrated Thematic Instruction program of Susan Kovalik, are as follows:

Enriched Environment: The classroom contains lots of creatures and things from the real world.

Themes: A theme is an overarching concept that knits the various strands of the curriculum into an integrated, meaningful whole.

Tribes: Students do much of their work in "tribes," or groups of four to six members each.

Megaskills: Megaskills, a term coined by Dorothy Rich, are behaviors and attitudes such as responsibility, initiative, and caring.

Lifelong Guidelines: Five "lifelong guidelines" guide student behavior: personal best, no put-downs, active listening, truth, and trust.

Choices: Lessons are presented in different ways to appeal to the varied learning styles of students, and students have different options for carrying out assignments.

Inquiries: Assignments often go beyond mere drill work, involving research, hands-on activities, real-life applications, and other meaningful projects.

nents as they see fit, using the ones they feel comfortable with, modifying where necessary, retaining traditional practices where appropriate. In other words, CLASS does not involve the transmission of a fixed set of curricular and instructional strategies from trainer to teacher. Rather, the program invites teachers to become part of a *process* of innovation, working with CLASS personnel and other teachers to develop

their own classroom and/or schoolwide strategies for change. Thus, the results of participation in the program are different from teacher to teacher and school to school.

As discussed below, this process-oriented approach to educational innovation has accounted for some of the most significant accomplishments of CLASS, particularly its success as a professional development program. The process approach may also contribute to one of the problems with the program: the tremendous time demands it places on teachers.

School-Level Adoption of CLASS

CLASS has been adopted in different schools in different ways. At Central, for example, the teaching staff was selected from around the school district specifically for the program, while at Northwood, the principal presented the program to the existing staff and let them decide whether to participate. The latter approach was the one most principals said they followed, stressing that teacher participation in CLASS must be voluntary. Although most teachers surveyed (80%) reported that they were indeed participating voluntarily in the program, a few (17%) said that CLASS was imposed upon them by the administration. "At times," wrote one teacher, "even though we have a choice to participate in CLASS, the administration makes you feel like you *should* be involved." Tacit coercion, along with other glitches in the adoption process, such as the administration's failure to adequately address teachers' concerns, can reduce teachers' commitment to the program.

Parents have been involved in the CLASS adoption process to different degrees at different schools. At Amy Beverland, for example, they were involved every step of the way, accounting in part for the widespread acceptance of CLASS in that community. At the other end of the spectrum, parents at several schools have scarcely been informed that CLASS is in operation.

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Some parents have opposed CLASS on religious grounds, accusing it of promoting the New Age movement. As a result of this opposition, CLASS has been a source of controversy in a few districts. In a few other districts, administrators have defused potential controversy by meeting with critics and explaining exactly what the program does and does not entail.

Training

Some teachers have attended Integrated Thematic Instruction workshops conducted by Susan Kovalik. The majority of teachers, however, have been trained and coached by Pedersen. During the first two years of the program, she offered a variety of training activities:

- Half-day, full-day, or three-day workshops on aspects of CLASS such as tribes or themes;
- Follow-up coaching in the form of discussions and mini-workshops;

- Opportunities to observe experienced CLASS teachers in action.

Teachers from different schools received different amounts of training, depending upon how much they requested and how easily arrangements could be made to spend time away from their classrooms.

Teachers generally have been quite pleased with their training: 80% of surveyed teachers reported that they were satisfied with the overall training program, although more than half said they would like to have had additional training and follow-up coaching. The coaching in particular stands out as a major achievement of the program. As one teacher wrote, "CLASS is the first project that the state of Indiana has recognized as having merit to hire *Coaches* to assist/mentor other teachers through their restructuring efforts. . . . This I feel is paramount to the success of CLASS, or any other funded program."

Despite the general overall satis-

faction, teachers were concerned with three aspects of training. Teachers from several schools said that their initial training was somewhat unstructured. Others said that some of the workshops for experienced CLASS teachers repeated material the teachers had already learned. Finally, some principals and teachers were concerned about the amount of time teachers had to spend away from the classroom when they attended training sessions.

Classroom Implementation

The extent to which teachers have begun implementing CLASS components varies markedly from teacher to teacher. Some have simply posted a list of megaskills on the bulletin board and continued teaching in more or less traditional fashion. Others, like Rosalie Alexander (described above), have almost totally transformed their classrooms.

On the survey we asked teachers (a) whether they had tried particular components in their classrooms, (b) how extensively they had used the components, and (c) how easy the components were to implement. Over 90% of teachers surveyed reported having tried hands-on learning (97%), themes (96%), tribes (95%), enriched environment (94%), lifelong guidelines (93%), and choices (93%). Of these, the most extensively used were lifelong guidelines and hands-on learning. The easiest components to implement were lifelong guidelines and megaskills, with themes and inquiries the most difficult. Interestingly, inquiries finished last in all three categories, and choices finished second- or third-to-last, indicating that, for some reason, teachers were not as enthusiastic about either of these related components as they were about some of the others.

The chief obstacle to implementation, mentioned by virtually every teacher, was the enormous amount of time it took to put CLASS in place, particularly the thematic component. "There is so much planning, collecting

Highlights from the Teacher Survey¹

Training

- 80% of teachers were satisfied with training, but 55% requested more coaching.

Classroom Implementation

- Over 90% agreed that more library resources, more money for materials, and more paid professional days would facilitate the transition to CLASS.

Effect on Students

- 78% agreed that CLASS had greatly increased students' academic motivation.
- 75% agreed that CLASS had greatly increased students' social skills development.
- 47% agreed that there were great increases in students' academic performance.
- 40% agreed that CLASS had greatly decreased the discipline problems of their students.

Professional Development

- 85% agreed that CLASS had a positive effect on their professional development.
- 50% agreed that CLASS had positive effects on their relations with parents.

¹ Surveys were sent to all 289 teachers in the CLASS program; 152 teachers returned the surveys, for a return rate of 53%.

and material to cover," wrote one teacher. "I am excited about teaching but at this rate I am concerned about teacher burn out!" Teachers were also concerned about the amount of personal money they were spending on classroom materials. Other difficulties included integrating mathematics into the theme, finding adequate resources for theme development, and maintaining order in the cooperative classroom.

Additionally, although respondents reported no state policies that hindered implementation, lack of district flexibility regarding the use of alternative textbooks and unconventional report cards that reflect CLASS components was starting to emerge as a problem.

The three things teachers said would help them the most in making the transition to thematic instruction were (1) more library resources, (2) more money for materials, and (3) more paid professional days during the summer and school year.

Effects of CLASS on Students (As Perceived by Teachers and Administrators)

A few teachers worried that CLASS was having minor adverse effects on some students, contributing to misbehavior and keeping students from doing enough individual work, for example. However, a large majority of teachers and administrators agreed that CLASS was providing significant benefits to students. Students were more motivated and more enthusiastic about coming to school, respondents said, at least in part because CLASS schools were warmer, friendlier places. Students were acquiring higher-order thinking skills (creativity, research skills, and so forth) and making connections between the things they learned. And they were becoming more caring, cooperative, and responsible people. In addition, the more CLASS components teachers reported using, and the more extensively they used each component, the greater the student benefits they reported.

Highlights from the Parent Survey¹

Parent Involvement

- 68% of parents agreed that CLASS had improved their relations with the school.
- 66% agreed that they were more involved with their child's learning because of CLASS.

Academic Performance

- 75% agreed that their child's critical-thinking skills had improved as a result of CLASS, 71% their child's research skills, 68% their child's reading and writing skills, and 66% their child's basic arithmetic skills.
- Only 36% agreed that their child spends more time on homework because of CLASS.

Social Skills Development

- 71% agreed that CLASS had improved their child's social skills.

Child's Attitude Toward School

- 72% agreed that their child's enthusiasm for school had increased.

¹Surveys were sent to 809 parents at 2 of the 26 CLASS schools; 335 parents returned surveys, for a return rate of 41%.

Interestingly, the greatest benefits to students reported by teachers accrued in the so-called "affective domain"—motives, attitudes, and social skills. For example, 78% of teachers surveyed agreed that CLASS had greatly increased students' *motivation to learn*, while only 47% agreed that CLASS had greatly increased students' *academic performance*. (See the box on page 3 for highlights from the teacher survey.) In terms of academic performance itself, students' improvements were deemed greater in higher-order skills than in the basics.

This pattern should come as no surprise: CLASS is designed in large part to make school exciting, enhance social skills, and improve higher-order thinking. One potential problem with this emphasis, however, is that these "softer" educational areas are difficult to measure "objectively" (i.e., with standardized tests). In the absence of such measurements, other kinds of concrete evidence about the effects of CLASS on students may need to be developed to satisfy the public demand for accountability.

Effects of CLASS on Teachers

From all indications, CLASS has fostered professional development in many ways. For one thing, teachers, even those with decades of experience, said they felt rejuvenated by CLASS. As one put it, "It's nice to be excited about something new after 21 years of teaching." Additionally, teachers are learning new things about the subjects they teach. They are re-examining past practices and developing alternative ones. They are taking more risks. And they are working together. The result is that they are starting to feel like professionals—something that has been a goal of education reformers for at least a decade.

The approach taken by Pedersen no doubt has a great deal to do with CLASS's success as a professional development program. As described above, CLASS is not presented as a lock-step prescription for change but as a flexible set of innovative strategies that teachers can implement as they see fit. The overriding message to teachers is that they are bright, dedicated indi-

viduals capable of making decisions on their own and carrying out those decisions in ways that will benefit students.

Parents' Responses

The majority of parent respondents supported the CLASS program, many of them vigorously. As the box on page 4 indicates, two thirds or more of parents surveyed consistently agreed that CLASS was providing a range of benefits.

In written comments and conversations, parents praised the enthusiasm of teachers and the family atmosphere of the school. They mentioned children's increased enthusiasm for school, improved thinking skills, and impressive research projects. Many also said that their children were becoming more caring, cooperative, and responsible. "We have seen so many positive results in our child from this school," wrote one typically appreciative parent.

However, amid the general praise, parents mentioned some areas of concern. The main concern was that children were not getting a good grounding in basic skills. Wrote one parent, "Basic skills are missing. I see more detail in the theme than what is needed at certain grade levels, while other proficiencies are not being taught at all." Many parents also wondered how well their children would make the transition from a nurturing CLASS school to a more impersonal middle school. Some were concerned about a lack of discipline in the classroom. And a few said that the cooperative approach favored the group at the expense of the individual.

Summary and Suggestions

Overall, the data suggest that CLASS makes students more enthusiastic about learning, that it fosters social skills such as cooperation and caring, and that it contributes to an improvement in higher-order thinking skills. Additionally, CLASS appears

to be an effective professional development program, renewing and empowering teachers, instilling pride, and creating a sense of ownership. CLASS's success as a teacher development program is due in part to its process-oriented approach to innovation, particularly the extensive follow-up coaching.

The main concern on the part of teachers was the immense amount of time they have to spend implementing CLASS. Parents' main concern was that themes, tribes, and megaskills were being overemphasized at the expense of academic rigor, particularly basic skills. Parents were also very concerned about their children's transition to middle school. Finally, a small number of parents have objected to CLASS for religious reasons, leading to controversy in a few districts.

One way to address some of these concerns is to *improve communication* on all fronts. Principals need to make sure they address the concerns of teachers (and not tacitly pressure them to participate). Principals also need to communicate with parents from the beginning of the decision-making process, and teachers need to keep in touch with parents once the program is in gear, demonstrating that children are learning basic skills as well as other types of skills (if such is indeed the case). Finally, a dialogue needs to be opened between the elementary and middle school levels concerning effective transition strategies.

In addition to encouraging better communication among all parties, we offer in the longer report a number of other suggestions for facilitating implementation of the program. Some of the suggestions are as follows:

- Schools need to arrange for more planning time for teachers, both individual and collective planning time.
- To make teachers' workloads more tolerable, CLASS staff and the IDOE are encouraged to expand arrangements whereby teachers receive graduate credit or certification renewal units for attending training sessions.

- Schools should be aware that certain facets of the CLASS program may be opposed by some parents on religious grounds and should be prepared to respond thoughtfully to such concerns.
- Districts may want to consider giving CLASS teachers more freedom to select alternative books and materials and to develop new report cards.
- Districts with CLASS schools may want to consider letting parents opposed to the program send their children to another school in the district, and letting parents who favor the CLASS approach send their children to a CLASS school.

Wider Implications of CLASS

At the very least, CLASS is a model for reform that builds the capacity of schools to change at the same time that it creates the expectation for change. The increased participation of schools in CLASS is one indication that such programs, even though voluntary, can have a widespread effect on the day-to-day lives of teachers and students. The lesson for policymakers is not necessarily to expand CLASS throughout the state, although there is reasonable evidence that such an expansion might have a positive effect on other schools that want to be involved (as long as the expansion does not exceed the capacity of Pedersen and other program staff to meet the increased demand for training and follow-up coaching). Rather, CLASS can be seen as a prototype for other state-supported reform efforts aimed at providing teachers with meaningful support to institute non-traditional approaches to instruction.

In fact, other such models of school innovation are available—the RE: Learning program that Indiana has joined, Henry Levin's accelerated schools model, and schools based on James Comer's work, to give three well-known examples. What distinguishes CLASS from even these worthy programs is the continuous direct assistance—the training and coaching

—it provides to teachers. However, CLASS's approach to training can easily be adapted to other schoolwide instructional innovations.

One possibility, then, is for the state to consider the replication of the CLASS approach using other models of classroom improvement, such as the three mentioned above. If such a course were followed, there are a number of lessons that can be drawn from the state's experience with CLASS:

1. It is important to have expert

teachers and instructors available to provide the training and coaching, preferably individuals who have credibility with Indiana teachers.

2. Such programs should be voluntary and should respect participating teachers' own professional judgment and capacity for professional growth.

3. Clear information about the program needs to be provided to schools, teachers, and parents at the time of their decision to participate.

4. The decision to participate in the

program should involve meaningful consultation with parents and the community.

5. The program of training and coaching needs to be carefully planned to meet the needs of teachers at different points of program implementation.

6. The program should recognize teachers' needs for additional planning time and classroom resources.

7. Continuing communication with parents and other community members should be built into the program.

The full report, *Connecting Learning Assures Successful Students: Putting CLASS in Schools* (February 1993), by Mark Buechler and Nick Vesper, is available from the Indiana Education Policy Center Bloomington office for \$15.00.

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